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ABSTRACT

This bulletin summarizes the findings of a study that sought to determine what policies, regulations, and practices teachers believed posed the most significant constraints on their classroom activities; whether these constraints originated at the federal, state, local, or school level; and what effect the costraints had on quality instruction and innovation. Data were gathered through a telephone survey of 400 Indiana teachers and through focus group discussions with 65 teachers. Major constraints on classroom activities were found to be poor funding, large class size, lack of authority to discipline, ISTEP, mandated curriculum or textbooks, and required nonteaching duties. Teachers rarely cited the traditional school governance structure directly as a constraint. Effects of constraints on teachers' activities included: erosion of opportunities to exercise professional judgment, ineffective use of time, deficient resources, and general frustration. The paper concludes that teachers were more concerned with aspects of school improvement like additional funding, relief from nonteaching duties, and more planning time than they were with elaborate schemes for restructuring; and those teachers who were undertaking sweeping changes were, for the most part, not constrained from doing so by specific policies. (JDD)

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Indiana Education Policy Center

POLICY BULLETIN

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Constraints on Teachers' Classroom Effectiveness: The Teachers' Perspective

by
Mark Buechler

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An Indiana Education Policy Center study uncovers numerous obstacles to effective classroom instruction but also finds that many teachers have considerable leeway for innovation.

In most states, the preferred method of education reform during the mid-1980s was to impose mandates on the schools from above. During the past several years, however, a new notion of school reform has taken hold: restructuring. Although restructuring means different things to different people, encompassing all sorts of innovations in school organization, curriculum, and instruction, it hinges on the notion that teachers should have a greater voice in the decision-making process at the school level. Thus, the policymaking philosophy consonant with restructuring is *deregulation*. The question then arises: Which regulations should be relaxed in the attempt to transfer more authority for educational decision making to the teachers themselves?

To help answer this question for the state of Indiana, the Indiana Education Policy Center, at the request of the Indiana Department of Education, conducted a study of constraints on teachers' classroom activities. We wanted to find out what policies, regulations, and practices teachers believed posed the most significant constraints; whether these constraints originated at the federal, state, local, or school level; and what effect they had on quality instruction and innovation. This bulletin is a summary of the 70-page report.

Methodology

Two strategies were used to gather perception data from teachers: (a) a statewide telephone survey of 400 teachers and (b) focus group discussions with some 65 teachers in four Indiana school districts and two Twenty-First Century Schools (schools that have received state grants to develop restructuring programs).

Constraints Cited by Teachers

Telephone respondents cited the following six policies and practices, in order, as the major constraints on classroom activities:

1. Poor funding
2. Large class size
3. Lack of authority to discipline
4. ISTEP
5. Mandated curriculum or textbooks
6. Required non-teaching duties, namely supervisory duties and paperwork.

Most teachers said that poor funding, ISTEP, and mandated curricula originated at the state level, while they saw large class size, lack of

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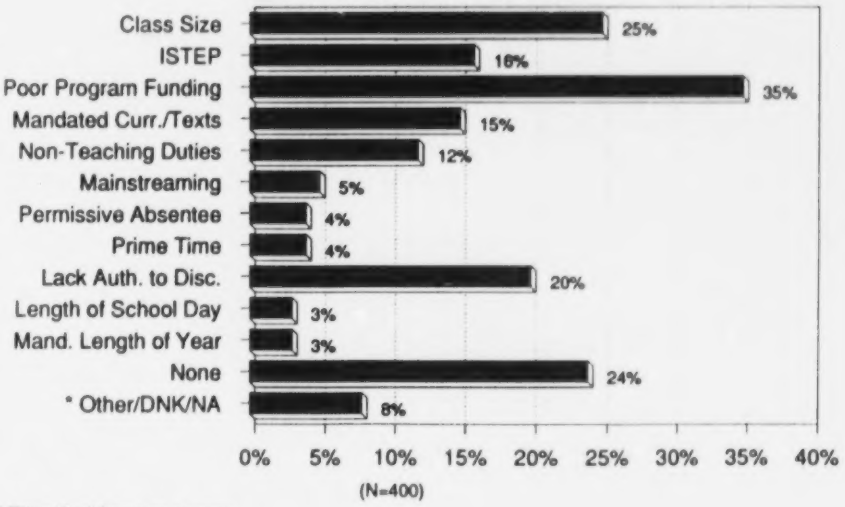
authority to discipline, and required non-teaching duties primarily as functions of school-level policies.

Interestingly, almost one fourth of the telephone respondents (96 out of 400) said that there were no policies or practices that interfered with their classroom activities. Of the remaining 304 respondents, 70 cited only one constraint, 157 cited two, 34 cited three, and 43 cited four—the maximum number allowed by the survey design.

Focus group participants also were troubled by the above six constraints, particularly poor funding, ISTEP, and required non-teaching duties. But the constraint of most concern to focus group participants was the state-mandated minimum time requirements for specific subjects. Focus group members also voiced concern about lack of planning time, limited professional development opportunities, restrictions on parent/teacher conferences, school bus schedules, Chapter 1 policies, mainstreaming policies for children with disabilities, and problems caused by the growing number of disadvantaged students. (These constraints are all analyzed in detail in the full report.)

There were few surprises in the constraints mentioned by teachers. Lack of funding, class size, non-teaching duties... these are areas that have troubled teachers for years. What was somewhat surprising, given the current focus on restructuring, was that teachers rarely cited the traditional school governance structure directly as a constraint. To be sure, teachers in some districts were concerned with the bureaucratic consequences of the current system, the red tape and cumbersome procedures. However, few teachers called for dramatic changes in school organization.

Teachers' Perceptions: Constraints on Classroom Effectiveness



* Other/don't know/no answer

Types of Constraints

The constraints teachers cited fell into four broad categories:

- Societal problems, like poverty and dysfunctional families, which contribute to the increasing number of disadvantaged children in the schools.
- Constraints that result less from specific educational policies than from longstanding political and economic circumstances in Indiana. Poor funding is the best example, since it is rooted in tax policies, assessment procedures, and low property wealth in many districts.
- Interactions between an existing policy and other factors such as local interpretation/implementation of the policy, lack of enforcement, external pressures, and unwritten rules. For example, lack of authority to discipline is less a result of official policy, which is usually fairly strict and explicit, than of failure to enforce the policy due to parental pressure on the principal or superintendent.
- Specific education policies that directly affect teachers' classroom activities. The most prominent of these was the state-mandated minimum time requirements for each subject. Others included ISTEP, mandated add-ons to the curriculum, and limited parent/teacher conferences.

Although constraints from all four categories were obviously of concern to teachers, the constraints in the fourth category are most pertinent to policymakers seeking to relax regulatory restrictions.

Effects of Constraints on Teachers' Activities

Each policy or practice cited as a constraint had specific effects on teachers' activities in the classroom.

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For example, minimum time requirements dictate rigid weekly schedules that infringe on teachers' ability to teach what they think is important, to integrate subjects, and to coordinate planning times. From the many different specific effects, it is possible to identify four general effects of constraints on teachers' activities and attitudes:

- **Erosion of Opportunities to Exercise Professional Judgment:** Many teachers were concerned that test scores were being used in place of teachers' professional judgment to make important decisions about students.
- **Ineffective Use of Time:** Policies that shape or absorb teachers' time were a particular source of concern. Teachers want more control over the way their day, week, and year are scheduled and more opportunities to work with each other to develop curricula and team teach.
- **Deficient Resources:** Inadequate funding created a number of deficiencies at the school and classroom levels, including inadequate teaching equipment and materials, inadequate counseling and social services for disadvantaged students, and too few teacher aides.
- **General Frustration:** Many teachers, especially those in the focus groups, expressed a general sense of frustration with their teaching careers, not focused on any specific policy or practice, but on the cumulative effect of the many policies and practices discussed throughout the report.

The constraint of most concern to focus group participants was the state-mandated minimum time requirements for specific subjects.

Effects on Innovation

Obviously, policies and practices that constrain teachers' classroom activities are going to inhibit their capacity for innovation, at least indirectly. However, policies and practices did not inhibit innovation in as straightforward a manner as might have been expected.

Out of 400 telephone survey respondents, 339 reported that they or their fellow teachers had tried to introduce changes, and two thirds of these indicated that the efforts had been successful. Most of these changes involved updating the curriculum or wresting additional planning time from tight schedules, but a few involved more sweeping changes like team teaching, experimental programs, or reorganization of grade levels. (The two major roadblocks to change cited by telephone respondents were lack of funding and negative school board responses.)

Virtually all focus group teachers said that they had plenty of latitude to be creative and explore new teaching styles and instructional strategies within their own classrooms. When discussion turned away from individual classrooms to more sweeping changes, however, comments varied widely from district to district, even from school to school within the same district. In one district, teachers said that district officials supported innovations for gifted/talented programs but not much else. In another district, teachers said that the district supported innovations as long as they did not cost anything and that it was a few "naysaying" teachers more than anyone else who resisted change. In a third district, some teachers said that while district administrators actively encouraged change, they erected barriers of red tape that effectively obstructed it. Other teachers in the same district, however, said they felt free to innovate. Teachers in many districts said that the principal of the school, more than any policy, determined whether or not change could occur.

Discussion

These disparate perceptions call into question two major assumptions embodied in recent pronouncements on restructuring: that top-down mandates are stifling teachers' creativity and that eliminating the mandates would spark an unprecedented surge of innovation in the schools. Based on these assumptions, we had expected that many of the teachers we interviewed (a) would be yearning to implement major changes in their schools but (b) would be stifled by policy constraints.

Teachers generally placed a higher priority on improving the basic conditions under which teaching and learning take place than on introducing dramatic innovations.

Neither of these expectations has been strongly supported by the results of our study, however. First, most teachers were more concerned with aspects of school improvement like additional funding, relief from non-teaching duties, and more planning time than they were with elaborate schemes for restructuring. Second, those teachers who were undertaking more dramatic changes were for the most part not constrained from doing so by specific policies. (The main exception was the minimum time requirements, from which teachers consistently had to request waivers.) It is not that the road to innovation was without obstacles. Innovating

teachers had to convince other *people* to support their initiatives—fellow teachers, the principal, local school board members. They may have been discouraged by lack of funding, lack of planning time, and insufficient staff development opportunities. However, despite frustrations, some teachers are effecting significant change within the current system.

Some policymakers might be tempted to interpret these two conclusions as an indication that many teachers lack the will and imagination to pursue dramatic changes in the schools. No doubt, as several focus group participants declared, there are some teachers who instinctively resist change. Our data suggest, however, that this is not the case with most teachers. In the first place, before teachers undertake major innovations, they must be convinced that these innovations are an appropriate response to the conditions they experience every day in the schools. Some of the teachers we talked to have yet to be convinced. They have seen education reforms come and go, leaving behind little but elevated rhetoric and frustrated expectations. As a result, many teachers placed a higher priority on improving the basic conditions under which teaching and learning take place than on introducing dramatic innovations. Second, major change is a time-consuming, arduous process, which often starts with minor alterations that may gradually mushroom into bolder reforms.

Whatever innovations teachers eventually undertake, they likely will continue to favor policies that increase educational funding, reduce class size, improve classroom discipline, cut down on non-teaching duties, facilitate parent involvement, meet a broader range of needs for disadvantaged students, allow for additional training and collaborative planning, give them a greater voice in designing their schedules, and enhance their sense of professionalism. According to our interviews, these are the top priorities for Indiana teachers.

This Bulletin summarizes the report ***Constraints on Teachers' Classroom Effectiveness*** *(1991), by Mark Buechler, Robert Arnove, Martha McCarthy, and Gayle Hall. Copies of the report are available from the Indiana Education Policy Center Bloomington Office for $7.50.*

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